

IF YOU DON'T SEE BIRDS HERE, YOU'RE JUST NOT TRYING.

10



GREAT SPOTS TO WATCH BIRDS IN MONTANA

BY CRAIG AND LIZ LARCOM

Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area, 30 miles west of Great Falls, is Montana's best-known birding site. Each year birders from across Montana and throughout the United States visit the shallow, 1,500-acre basin, which attracts 100-plus species, from avocets to yellowthroats. But Freezout is not the only spot to see a wide variety of bird life in Big Sky Country. As avid bird watchers and professional photographers, we have found birding hotspots across the state, from the flat prairies in the northeast to mountainous backcountry lakes in the southwest. Listed here are five of our favorites, as well as another five picked by birding experts from across Montana.

Birders look for prairie species on state land in Valley County north of Glasgow (see page 14 for details and directions).



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM



Lazuli bunting
DONALD M. JONES



Yellow-rumped warbler
DONALD M. JONES

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Onstad Park, Westby

Each May, we drive east to Westby to see a warbler concentration unlike anywhere else in Montana. The colorful birds are moving between winter habitat in Central and South America and summer nesting places in the insect-rich boreal forests of Alaska, British Columbia, and Alberta. As they fly above the prairie, the warblers are drawn to a tiny 1-acre park in this small town tucked into the northeastern corner of the state. Canada, chestnut-sided, yellow-rumped, and other warblers find shelter and food in the park's trees, hedges, and bushes. They also drink from a hose that drips into a small pool. "Sooner or later every bird comes to the water," says Ted Nordhagen, a local bird illustrator who has seen an amazing 29 different warbler species here over the years.

Some springs the park contains a dozen or more warbler species at one time, while during other years only a few species dribble through. When activity is low at Westby, we look for birds at nearby Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

The Westby park becomes an even greater warbler magnet during fall. Migration is heaviest mid-August through mid-September, when the birds are building energy reserves for the long trip south. A bonus bird sighting at Westby is always possible. Over the years, Nordhagen has seen such rarities as the Connecticut warbler, Philadelphia vireo, and yellow-bellied flycatcher.

For more information: Westby city hall, (406) 385-2445; nemontanabirdingtrail.org.

The long-billed curlew, marbled godwit, and western meadowlark are the most vocal and visible species at this large prairie parcel on the west side of Montana Highway 24, roughly 4 miles north of Glasgow Base Pond (a gravel pit pond 20 miles north of Glasgow on MT 24). The parcel is part of a National Audubon Society Important Bird Area called the North Valley Grasslands, one of the largest tracts of mixed-grass prairie in the United States.

At a glance, the site looks like a uniform field of grass. But Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wildlife biologist John Carlson advises visitors to look carefully. The grassland is composed of many different plant species of differing heights and types. This prairie mosaic provides diverse habitat for grassland bird species including McCown's longspur, Baird's sparrow, and Sprague's pipit. These and other grassland birds have beautiful songs, and Carlson recommends early morning from mid-May to mid-June to hear them sing in the expansive landscape. "You get out there and are surrounded entirely by prairie," he says. "There's such a variety of grassland bird species. You won't find many other places like it left in the world."

For more information:

BLM Glasgow Field Station, (406) 228-3750.



Mixed-grass prairie in North Valley County
CHUCK HANEY

10 HOTSPOTS LOCATION KEY

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|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 Westby | 6 Benton Lake NWR |
| 2 North Valley County | 7 Red Rock Lakes NWR |
| 3 Bear Canyon | 8 Georgetown Lake |
| 4 Bluebird Trail | 9 Mission Valley |
| 5 Bridger Bowl | 10 Pete Creek |



Birding trails popping up across Montana

Find additional birding hotspots along Montana's new "birding trails." The trails are chains of bird-rich sites, linked by roads, designated by local and state birding experts. Montana has seven birding trails, and more are being added each year. The "trails" approach is being adopted across the country by local communities hoping to attract the nation's growing number of bird watchers.

In Montana, establishment of new birding trails is coordinated by a committee of ornithologists and other bird experts chaired by John Carlson, a BLM wildlife biologist in Glasgow. The committee advises local groups representing tourism, public lands, and bird watching interests on how to establish a trail, set up a website, and produce printed materials.

For information on western Montana birding trails, visit montanabirdingtrail.org. For a brochure on the Bitterroot Trail, call (406) 327-0405. For the Northeastern Plains Birding Trail brochure, call (800) 527-5348 or visit nemontanabirdingtrail.org. Russell County, the state's north-central tourism region, has a birding trail detailed in a brochure available by calling (800) 527-5348 or visiting russell.visitmt.com/birding. For birding opportunities around West Yellowstone, call (406) 646-7701 or visit yellowstonevacations.com and click on "Area Attractions."



Step into the lower and middle reaches of Bear Canyon, on the southwest side of the Pryor Mountains, and you'll think you're somewhere in Nevada's Great Basin desert. Blue-gray gnatcatchers, green-tailed towhees, and pinyon jays are among the birds you can spot in this driest part of Montana, which receives just 5 inches of moisture each year.

Ornithologist Dr. Jeff Marks has often camped in this National Audubon Society Important Bird Area to band gnatcatchers as part of a research project with the Montana Natural Heritage Program. Marks says visitors may also see yellow-breasted chats, sage thrashers, loggerhead shrikes, MacGillivray's warblers, canyon wrens, and dusky flycatchers.

You'll need a detailed BLM or other map to find this spot, and a high-clearance vehicle to reach it. From Laurel, take U.S. Highway 310 south to Warren, then head east on a paved road for about 2 miles. When you see a BLM sign, turn right on the dirt road (which is not all-weather). After roughly 2 miles, you'll see a sign on the left that says Bear Canyon. Follow that two-track road to the mouth of the canyon and park. Look for the gnatcatchers among sagebrush and junipers, and scout the cottonwoods for other songbirds. Note: No off-road travel allowed.

For more information: BLM Billings Field Office, (406) 896-5013; Beartooth Ranger District, (406) 446-2103; the Montana sites at audubon.org/bird/iba.

Craig and Liz Larcom are photographers and writers in Great Falls.



Dusky flycatcher
DONALD M. JONES



Mountain bluebird
DONALD M. JONES

The mountain bluebird's intense sky blue plumage enchants us every time we see it. Mountain bluebirds are scattered throughout the state. But when we need our yearly fix of blue, we head to this scenic bluebird trail on the northeastern edge of the Little Belt Mountains anytime between late March and September.

Great Falls resident Bob Niebuhr, president of the conservation group Mountain Bluebird Trails, created this series of bluebird boxes along country roads in 1991. He has installed more than 100 boxes south of Stanford along Dry Wolf Road, Running Wolf Road, Divide Road, and Sage Creek Trailhead Road. The boxes contain holes just big enough to admit bluebirds but small enough to exclude magpies, raccoons, and other predators. (Another blue bird, the tree swallow, also uses the houses. You can easily distinguish this species from the mountain bluebird by its white belly and gliding flight.)

For more information: Mountain Bluebird Trails, (406) 453-5143; russell.visitmt.com/birding.

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ONE MAN'S QUEST TO LIST 300 DIFFERENT SPECIES IN 365 DAYS

BY GARY SWANT

I started seriously birding about 15 years ago and find it a leisurely hobby that brings me a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction. Not so leisurely is another related interest: bird "listing." In this competitive activity, birders try to record as many species as possible and beat their previous records or those of others. Last year I undertook a bird-listing marathon in which I drove nearly the circumference of the Earth in a quest to do something no Montana birder had ever accomplished.

My goal was to top the number of different species seen in Montana in one year. The previous record was 293, set by Wayne Tree of Stevensville in 2004. (Two other birders had succeeded in finding 304 and 307 species, respectively, but their lists were never submitted or published by the American Birding Association. The organization maintains records for the number of birds seen in a day, month, and lifetime by county, state, and province. I was considering only official ABA records.) I had tallied 265 in 2005 and 278 in 2006. By focusing exclusively on birds for a year—putting aside family vacations, fishing, hunting, and most other activities—I figured I could top the state record. I set my goal at 300 species. On January 1, 2007, I began my quest.

Gary Swant of Deer Lodge is an educational consultant and birding guide. To see his 2007 Montana list of 328 species, e-mail him at birdmontana@rfwave.net.



TIRED EYES Swant at the National Bison Range, near Moiese. The marathon birder uses an electronic device that allows him to hear bird songs at high frequencies.

My first rule was to record a species whenever possible, even if I knew I could get the bird more easily later in the year. My second rule was to enlist the help of other birders by using an Internet bird server called the Montana Outdoor Birding Group. I e-mailed several active members, explained my goal, and wrote that I would send them my list when I reached the first 100 species, and then again each time I added another 25. Throughout the year, more than 30 birders contacted me about new species not yet on my list. The third rule was to have someone with me as often as possible for documentation, especially for rare species. I violated that rule 37 times. Fortunately, I saw 34 of those species later in the year when someone was with me. The remaining three species were

not rare and therefore not contested.

In January, I birded 19 days and recorded 103 different species. February brought an additional 18 species during 11 trips. Another 16 trips in March resulted in 27 additional species. Spring birding in April yielded 42 more species in 12 outings, and another 83 were added in May after a long and fruitful trip to eastern Montana. With the year not yet half done, I had tallied 263 species and begun to think I might reach my goal. Then things got hard.

By June, I was finding it increasingly difficult to find new species, and added only 22 that month. Still, I was closing in on my goal. In early July I added 2 more, bringing my total to 297. I drove to Glacier National Park to try for the last three. Number 298 was a white-tailed ptarmigan, number 299 was a boreal chickadee, and number 300 was a black swift I spotted at dusk at Avalanche Campground with my wife and 14-year-old grandson present. The remainder of the month brought in another 6 species. I picked up just 1 in August, but during the fall migration in September, I took another long trip to eastern Montana and added 14.

At this point, I had seen and identified 321 different species. I had reached my personal goal and exceeded all official and unofficial state records. But I still had three months left in the year. I scoured MOB reports on the Internet and stayed close to the phone.

Many of my fellow birders were as excited about my quest as I was. In October and November, I received calls on a Pacific loon (number 322), a white-winged scoter (323), an Anna's hummingbird (324), a black scoter (325), a cackling goose (326) that required a 900-mile drive to Fort Peck, and a glaucous-winged gull (327) in Helena initially seen by a friend. My final bird was just 7 miles from home—a rusty blackbird that a buddy had spotted south of Deer Lodge. It was in a feedlot with a mixed flock of red-winged blackbirds, European starlings, and Brewer's blackbirds.

I drove 24,003 miles last year on my record-setting endeavor, and I saw a remarkable number of marvelous bird species. But most significant were the many friendships I made with birders during my journey, who called to report their sightings and showed me so many wonderful, out-of-the-way birding locations across Montana. ■



Bridger HawkWatch
CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

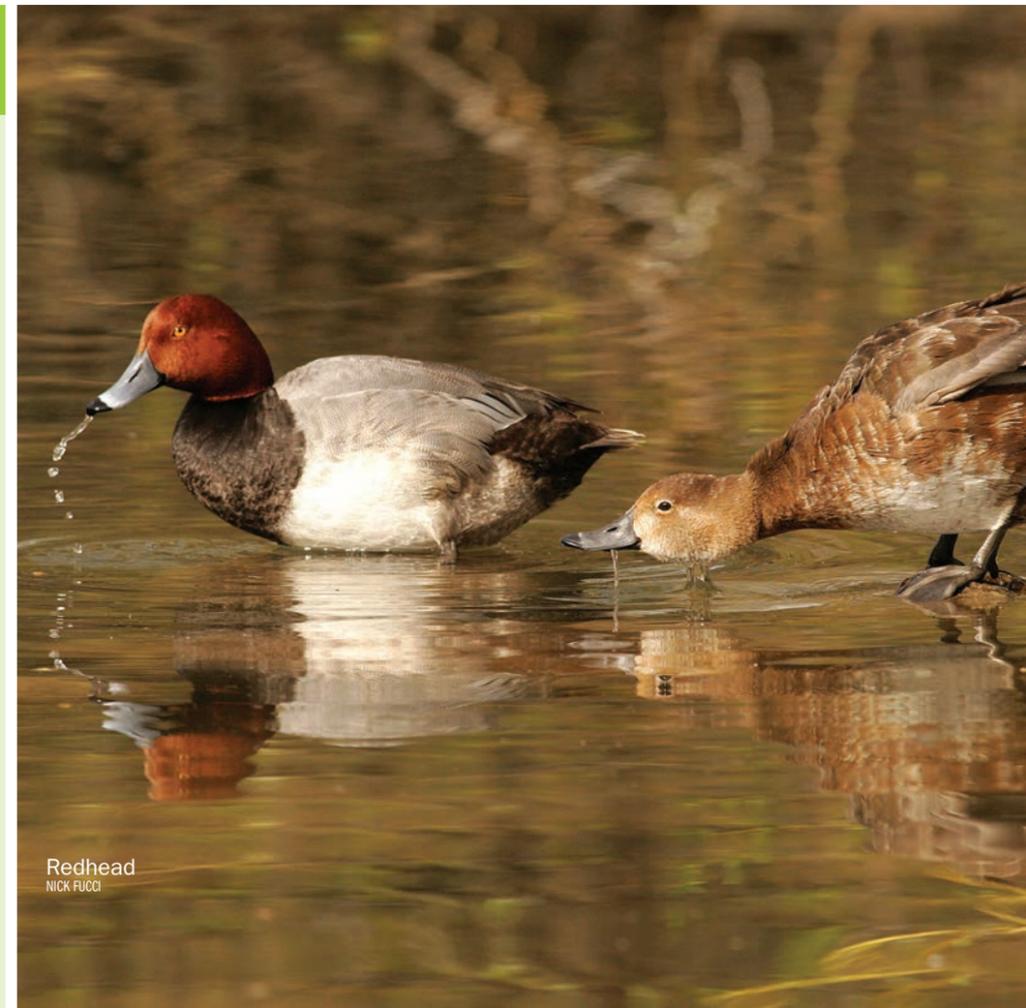
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Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Chestnut-collared longspurs and long-billed curlews thrive in Benton Lake's native prairie. Closer to water, a birder may also see black-necked stilts, white-faced ibises, eared grebes, black-crowned night-herons, Franklin's gulls, black terns, Wilson's phalaropes, yellow-headed blackbirds, American avocets, and marsh wrens. Rounding off the birding bill are nearly a dozen different species of waterfowl, which in late May to mid-July display their colorful breeding plumage.

The refuge, 10 miles north of Great Falls, also provides a blind (reservations required) for watching sharp-tailed grouse make their lively sunrise courtship display in April and May. But be sure to set your alarm clock: The show starts before dawn.

For more information:
Benton Lake NWR, (406) 727-7400;
bentonlake.fws.gov.



Redhead
NICK FUCCI

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Bridger HawkWatch, Bridger Bowl

If the 2,100-foot climb up the steep trail to the HawkWatch International (HWI) site above Bridger Bowl doesn't leave you breathless, the spectacular view of flying raptors just might. Visitors to this natural funnel for migrating raptors have seen more than 100 golden eagles in a single day (though such sightings are not common). According to Mike Neal, HWI field studies coordinator, more golden eagles migrate through here than any other place in the lower 48 states. Some days, the birds are nothing more than dots, flying a mile or more away; other days they fly close enough to be seen clearly without optics.

At the summit is a platform where HWI volunteer observers have a 360-degree view to see and record raptors. An owl decoy tempts some of the hawks and eagles to fly even closer. The site is one of two dozen HWI sites nationwide. Visitors are welcome.

Neal says the best time to see raptors is during the first two weeks of October from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.

For more information:
Bozeman Ranger District, (406) 522-2520;
www.montana.edu/misc/raptor.html.

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Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

Every birder needs to see a trumpeter swan at least once in her or his life. This watery, mountain-rimmed site just west of Yellowstone National Park is the best place in Montana to do it. The federal government established the refuge in 1935 specifically to save the swans, which had dwindled to fewer than 100 known individuals nationwide. Geothermal activity in the area keeps the lakes ice-free even in midwinter, allowing the swans to live there year-round.

Visit in late May through June, when swans and other breeding birds are active but mosquitoes have yet to hatch in large numbers. Look for swans at Shambo Pond and Lower Red Rock Lake, but avoid getting too close to these sensitive birds. Another great time to visit is late October, when trumpeters, tundra swans, and other migrating waterfowl fill the air.

Visitors can also see peregrine falcons and prairie falcons at the refuge. Upper Lake Campground draws a particularly wide assortment of songbirds. The refuge is also one of the best spots in Montana to see sandhill cranes.

The road to the refuge is rough, so call ahead to check on road conditions and current swan information. The headquarters is open weekdays.

For more information: Red Rock Lakes NWR, (406) 276-3536.



Trumpeter swans
NEAL & MJ MISHLER

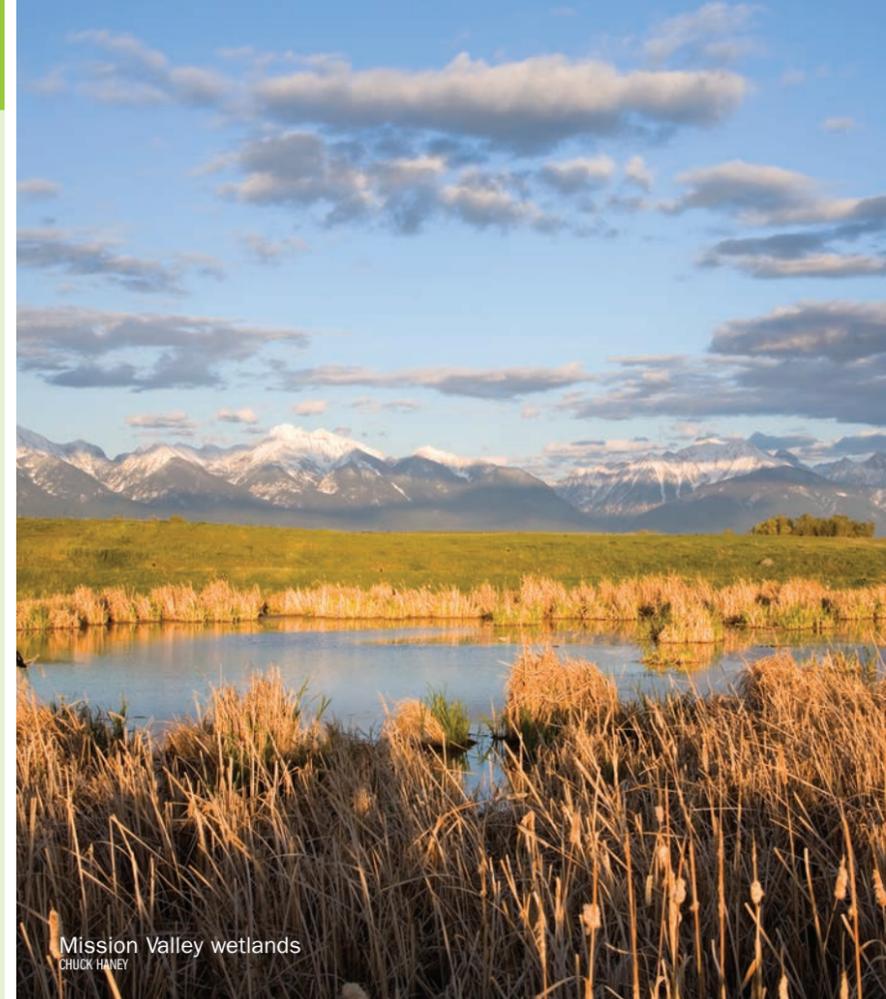
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Mission Valley

The Mission Valley is known for its lake and mountain scenery, but the up-close views of the area's abundant bird life can be equally spectacular. Water birds flock to the Pablo and Ninepipe national wildlife refuges. Pygmy nuthatches bounce in the ponderosa pines at Boettcher Park in Polson. Songbirds such as the lazuli bunting, American dipper, and Townsend's solitaire nest at the National Bison Range. Birders who visit wetlands around the valley may also spot trumpeter swans that have been released by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in cooperation with state and federal agencies.

According to ornithologist Dan Casey, chair of Montana Audubon's Bird Records Committee, the Mission Valley is one of the best places to see winter raptors. "It probably has the highest density of rough-legged hawks in the western United States," he says. Casey recommends looking for raptors on back roads such as the one west of Pablo actually named Back Road. During the 24 years Casey has been birding in the area, his most remarkable sighting came in the winter of 2005-06, when snowy owls moved down from Canada in great numbers. "One time I was able to see a group of a dozen snowy owls through the lens of my spotting scope," he says.

For more information: National Bison Range, (406) 644-2211; the Flathead Valley section of "birding hotspots" at mtaudubon.org (click on "Birdwatching").



Mission Valley wetlands
CHUCK HANEY

Pine grosbeak
DONALD M. JONES



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Georgetown Lake and vicinity

In 2007, Gary Swant of Deer Lodge drove more than 24,000 miles to see and identify 328 bird species, the most ever documented in Montana in a single year (see page 16). This year he is sticking close to home, visiting favorite birding sites such as Georgetown Lake, Silver Lake, and East Fork Reservoir.

"You could take a little trip to the three lakes and expect to see 50 to 70 bird species in summer and 30 species in winter," he says. Swant, who runs a bird guiding service called GoBirdMontana with his wife, visits the lakes most often in winter. Before they freeze, he may find a migrating common loon or an errant scoter or long-tailed duck. After snowstorms, Swant checks the area's forests for flocks of gray-crowned rosy-finches and black rosy-finches. In late winter, he particular looks for great gray owls. The owls hunt forest edges where stands of Douglas fir and lodgepole pine open up into high-mountain meadows. In January and February, the great grays hunt all day, boosting a visitor's chances of seeing one.

Swant says he also sees blue jays, Steller's jays, gray jays, evening grosbeaks, and pine grosbeaks at bird feeders among the area's increasing number of houses. And he has seen Harris's sparrows while strolling around East Fork Reservoir.

For more information: Pintler Ranger District, (406) 859-3211; GoBirdMontana, gobirdmontana.com.

Spruce grouse
DONALD M. JONES



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Pete Creek Kootenai National Forest

The Pete Creek area near Yaak might be considered the chickadee capital of Montana. The forested drainage holds four species—black-capped, mountain, chestnut-backed, and even the rare boreal—in addition to many other birds. The 21-mile drive from Pete Creek Campground to Northwest Peak Scenic Area moves from valley bottom to subalpine elevations. It passes a wetland that's likely to house western tanagers, and a burn where American three-toed woodpeckers and black-backed woodpeckers live. Pete Creek is also home to American dippers.

Libby photographer Donald M. Jones says the Pete Creek area is a great place to see spruce grouse, and the nearby Northwest Peak area is good for spotting dusky grouse, also known as blue grouse. "In the evening, listen for a veery or a varied thrush at the Pete Creek Campground," he adds.

Jones recommends that visitors wait until the second or third week of June, when snowdrifts have melted from the road. He also advises visitors to watch out for logging trucks. One other tip: Bring a fly rod. Hawkins Lake is just a quarter-mile hike from the road and holds a healthy trout population.

For more information: Troy Ranger Station, (406) 295-4693. 🐾